

Life on the Platform: Regulation, Algorithmic Control, And the Human Costs of India's Gig Economy

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ABSTRACT

India's gig economy has expanded rapidly, providing an entry into city jobs, but also shifting the risks of running a business onto workers. This article qualitatively analyses the structural precarity of platform labour in India from a socio-legal perspective using secondary data from policy documents, legislative texts, and published empirical studies. It goes beyond abstract notions of flexibility to consider the tangible human costs of digital labour such as operating costs borne by the labour, job and income insecurity, uncertain working hours, occupational safety and health risks, and digital surveillance and algorithmic control. The paper discusses how algorithmic management implements control via task allocation, pricing, real-time monitoring, customer ratings, incentives, and account deactivation. It also maps the trajectory of India's regulatory environment by comparing the national Code on Social Security (2020) with state legislation in Rajasthan and Karnataka. The article distinguishes between formal legal recognition (*de jure*) and how these protections are implemented, enforced, and accessed by workers in practice (*de facto*). The article also proposes a few recommendations addressing the underlying human costs. It concludes by noting that the future of platform economy will depend on whether policy regulations can do more than just recognise the problems faced by workers or not.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Platforms, Precarity, Labour, Gig Workers, Human Cost

INTRODUCTION

The growth of digital technologies has created new forms of work mediated by online platforms. Gig work is generally characterised as short-term tasks, contracts, or piece-rate jobs, with digital platforms serving as intermediaries connecting workers with those requiring their services (Faras et al., 2025). Different scholars define gig work in different ways. Drawing on the existing literature, Faras et al. (2025) state that some scholars use the term in a broad sense to refer to flexible work arrangements in which tasks are performed within a certain time frame. Other scholars, however, propose a narrow definition that includes formats such as "crowd work" and "work on demand via apps" in which digital platforms or mobile apps connect workers with particular tasks. Montgomery and Baglioni (2021) question whether the gig economy should be considered a completely new form of work, stating that the concept often lacks a clear "differentiation" from the already existing phenomenon of precarious work. Drawing on interviews with policymakers, trade union officials, labour organisations and gig workers, they find that gig economy is often understood through a "prism of continuity rather than change" and add that it should be better understood within the broader processes of precarity (p. 1012). They also point out that gig work is somewhere between self-employment and regular employment, and the employment relationship is difficult to define clearly.

The gig work on platforms is growing fast in India and has emerged as an important segment of the economy. The widespread availability and use of affordable internet and smartphones are driving its growth. NITI Aayog (2022) reports that in 2020-21, 7.7 million workers were involved in the gig economy, accounting for 2.6 per cent of non-agricultural employment, and is projected to increase to 23.5 million by 2029-30. This expansion is

often linked to the wider spread of digital technology, smartphones and cheap internet. The report additionally emphasises the “low-entry-barriers” of such work, which can give employment opportunities to people with different skill levels, including women, young people, and persons with disabilities. The growth of platform work is evident in ride hailing, food delivery, home-based services, logistics and e-commerce. Platforms function across about 300 cities in India (NITI Aayog, 2022).

Flexibility in platform work is not always linked to greater autonomy or security. Aloisi (2016) argues that the flexibility and autonomy of platform work are limited, as workers also have to cope with precarious working conditions and financial instability. In their study on low/medium-skilled platform workers in India, Malhotra and Agrawal (2025) find “low earnings” and “missing control” as key dimensions of workers’ lived experiences. They conclude that the “autonomy and flexibility” associated with platform work is not so much so, because workers have to adapt their schedules to market demand and the terms of the platforms. Financial pressures may also motivate workers to take on extra tasks. Following Wood et al. (2019), the authors describe this as “flexible discipline,” whereby workers have some autonomy over when they work, but must structure their schedules around the availability of platform work. According to Lata et al. (2023), the flexibility provided by platforms can actually benefit companies, allowing them to quickly adapt to changes in demand while controlling how work is organised. In this respect, the freedom workers experience can become a “mythical autonomy” as information gaps and algorithmic controls are still negotiating and exerting real control over their work. These constraints are very clearly visible in the domain of algorithmic management, where algorithms perform functions such as performance evaluation, compensation, and decisions about pay and dismissal (Malhotra & Agrawal, 2025). In India, Parth and Bathini (2021) demonstrate how platforms gather and analyse large quantities of data to create detailed “driver profiling and segmentation” (p. 74). These profiles are then used to allocate rides, design incentives and determine earnings. They called this personalised form of algorithmic control “microtargeting management control.”

These concerns show that the costs of platform work are not limited to earnings alone. In this article, “human costs” refers to the economic, physical, emotional as well as institutional burdens associated with platform work. These include operational expenses such as fuel and vehicle maintenance, long or uncertain working hours, job and income insecurity, and occupational safety and health risks (Behl et al., 2022; NITI Aayog, 2022; Medappa, 2023). In addition, they also include digital monitoring and rating systems used by platforms, information gaps about how work is allocated and evaluated, and the lack of effective grievance redressal mechanisms through which workers can challenge platform decisions (Parth and Bathini, 2021; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Malhotra and Agrawal, 2025).

In the policy discussions in India, there are also rising concerns about insecure working conditions and algorithmic control, which have raised the question of how platform work should be regulated. The Code on Social Security, 2020, which came into force on 21st November, 2025, provides a formal framework to bring gig and platform workers under the ambit of social security coverage, through schemes related to life and disability cover, accident insurance, health and maternity benefits and old age protection. But merely recognising platform workers as employees under social security laws does not address the deeper problems they face, including income insecurity, algorithmic control, and unequal power relations. In this article, we argue that while platform work may offer flexibility and income opportunities, workers often face higher risks and are subject to inbuilt platform controls. It argues that the flexibility of platform work is coupled with algorithmic control, income insecurity, and increased responsibility for workers. These issues persist despite India moving toward formal recognition and regulation of gig and platform work. The objective of this article is to critically examine the human costs of platform work and if the emerging regulatory measures in India can adequately address the challenges faced by platform workers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design. It combines narrative literature review with doctrinal and documentary analysis. The narrative literature review is used to examine and synthesise the existing literature on gig economy and platform work. On the other hand, doctrinal and documentary analysis is used to examine

the legal and policy framework which are related to gig and platform workers in India. A narrative review is specifically relevant for this study because it helps in bringing together different forms of literature, such as empirical studies, theoretical contributions, and policy documents, and also for examining a multidimensional issue through thematic interpretation. The study does not involve primary interviews or surveys and it also do not seek to produce statistical generalisations about the gig workforce.

Literature and Policy Sources

The literature for the study was selected according to its relevance to the core objectives of the paper. For this purpose, the authors paid particular attention to peer-reviewed research articles which deals with platform and gig work in India, including those studies which are done on changing employment relationships, algorithmic management, insecure income and working conditions of the workers, social protection and rights of workers. The literature was retrieved through targeted searches of JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar, by using a combination of keywords related to gig work, platform work, algorithmic control, precarity, social security, and regulation in the Indian context. Relevant policy and institutional reports were also included which were relevant to provide evidence on platform workers, their working conditions, and social protection measures.

The regulatory analysis was carried out by drawing on primary legal and policy materials. This includes Code on Social Security, 2020, relevant state level legislation, and other official documents related to gig and platform workers. Along with the academic and institutional literature, these materials were also examined together.

Analytical Framework

The selected literature was then subjected to thematic analysis by identifying the main arguments and findings across studies. The analysis was carried out around the major issues addressed in the paper: the expansion of platform work, the costs and risks shouldered by workers, income insecurity, social protection, and regulation.

The legal and policy materials were analysed using a doctrinal approach which involves the examination and synthesis of relevant legal provisions. These materials were helpful in making a comparison of platform practices, the human costs associated with them, applicable legal protections, enforcement mechanisms, and the regulatory gaps identified in the literature.

Criteria for Assessing the Regulatory Response

The regulatory analysis focuses on how far India's emerging laws and policies have been able to address the concerns on platform work which were identified in the literature. The analysis first examines formal recognition and protections provided to gig and platform workers under the existing legal and policy framework. Following which, it takes into consideration the provisions and other mechanisms related to their implementation and enforcement, and the extent to which these mechanisms can be accessed by the workers and if they truly benefit the workers in reality or not. Finally, the regulatory measures are examined in relation to the concerns discussed in the paper, such as income insecurity, extra responsibility and costs borne by the workers, algorithmic control and gaps in social protection. This helps the paper to better understand what is provided by the law on paper and whether it addresses the problems faced by platform workers.

Growth of India's Platform Economy

India's platform economy is no longer confined to a handful of app-based services. It is increasingly influencing the way different services are organised and delivered. Digitally enabled work like microwork and freelancing (Heeks et al., 2021) and location-based services such as ride-hailing, food delivery, and personal services are now delivered through digital platforms. This expansion is also reflected in forms of work in India that have historically been associated with "culture of servitude." For instance, Komarraju et al. (2022) show how Urban Company has expanded to a variety of home-based services, including personal grooming and spa treatments, yoga and fitness training, as well as household cleaning and appliance repair services such as AC, refrigerator and heater repairs, through an app-based platform model by linking the service providers and customers through automated matchmaking. Ray (2024) argues that the "organised informality" already in place has assumed a new

digital form in India's urban gig economy. Platform companies now connect millions of "independent contractors" via internet and smartphone-based platforms. Ray describes this as "digitally organised informalization," where workers perform platform-based work with their own vehicles, equipment or other resources but without access to the security and benefits that are normally associated with formal employment.

The evolution of ICTs and digital platforms has transformed the organisation of services. This transition has also been supplemented by the development of artificial narrow intelligence (ANI) and the growing middle class in India with an increasing need for part-time services (Chaudhary, 2020). Such developments have given rise to new types of work, in particular work based on apps and on-demand platforms. Digital technologies have penetrated rapidly, as attributed by NITI Aayog (2022) to the rise of platform businesses in India. This growth was driven in part by the increase in internet connections and the use of internet-enabled devices. Cheap data plans and the proliferation of cheap mobile devices also helped mobile-based platforms to thrive in India. The government's Digital India campaign has further accelerated this expansion. Elias and Gomez (2025) argue that digital platforms close "transaction voids" by improving the flow of information and linking workers with customers. This may lower the search costs and barriers to market entry for the firms participating. They also highlight "structural voids" in India's labour market such as limited employment opportunities and a mismatch between the education of workers and the skills required by available jobs. In such cases, platforms can provide an alternative way to access work, including for those who may not have formal educational qualifications.

The growth of platform work has also altered the relationship between service providers and workers. The majority of platforms serve as intermediaries between independent workers and customers, rather than as traditional employers. Platforms are "market intermediaries" that connect workers and customers and structure their interactions through "algorithm-based systems" (Elias and Gomez, 2025, p. 1). They also contend that platforms have emerged as important institutional actors, and has influenced institutional structures and blurred the lines between formal and informal labour. This is a form of pseudo-employment in which platform workers are treated as independent contractors instead of employees. Sharma (2021) argues that the workers depend on the platform for their livelihoods, but do not have the protections and benefits of formal employment. They also don't have enough economic independence to operate as normal businesses. She adds that platform work moves away from the traditional dyadic relationship of employer-employee and creates a more complex and less clearly defined relationship.

One of the costs of platform work that is often overlooked is that workers often have to bear the costs of carrying it out. Medappa (2023), in a study of app-based drivers in Bengaluru, points out that workers are cast as "micro-entrepreneurs" or "partners" but have to shoulder most of the costs of doing the job. This includes cars, fuel, smartphones, accessories, repairs, maintenance and vehicle insurance. Such costs, Behl et al. (2022) argue, are exacerbated by the fact that gig workers lack a fixed or guaranteed income from platform work. Their study found that during periods of low demand, the expenses incurred by the worker in running their vehicles can be higher than their earnings, resulting in very low net income even after working long hours. Moreover, Lata et al. (2023) observe that the risks of platform work are not only limited to the costs that workers have to bear, as they are also trapped in a cyclical loop of working and waiting for work. Workers who don't know when they will be called back to work find it difficult to plan or organise their lives. This also makes it more difficult to distinguish work time from private time and can wear people down physically and mentally.

The relation between capital and labour in the platform economy is structured around the platforms' control over workers, mediated through technological and social hierarchies (Nair, 2023). It implies that while platform workers may appear to be independent, they do not necessarily have much control over the organisation of their work or the conditions of work. Parwez (2022) also shows how labelling workers as "delivery partners" alters the traditional employer-employee relationship. It lets companies reduce their costs and shirk some of the responsibilities of having workers, while workers are left with little protection. Ray (2024) describes this development as "digitally organised informality," where workers find and do their work via digital platforms but rely on their own resources and are largely outside the protections available in formal employment. The following section will examine how the costs and uncertainties of platform work are making their way into the day-to-day working lives of gig workers in this wider context.

Everyday Precarity in India's Gig Economy

The daily precarity of India's growing gig economy is an institutionalised, systemic condition that constitutes the ongoing struggle for survival for millions of platform workers in urban spaces, not just an incidental friction of market modernisation (Agrawal & Bhukya, 2022). Ride-hailing drivers, workers who deliver food through quick-commerce platforms and digital freelancers all operate in a highly uncertain socioeconomic environment in which their personal safety and immediate means of subsistence are constantly vulnerable (Singh & Kaur, 2022). The widespread use of artificial intelligence and automated algorithms by platform companies, coupled with a steadily declining rate of real incomes and a complete lack of security to protect workers from market volatility, makes gig workers extremely vulnerable (Fairwork India, 2024). It's profound in the way businesses are built and operated, not as a happy accident or a temporary mistake in a new business model. In reality, companies that claim to provide flexibility as an empowering tool use it to transfer all operational, financial, and physical risks to the workers, while the platforms maintain total control over the workforce and extract massive financial gains without taking any responsibility for their employees (Fairwork India, 2024; Raval, 2020).

One of the mechanisms needed to uphold this subordination is algorithmic control, a complex system of ambiguous, zero-accountability digital governance that companies use to assign tasks, set work schedules, and continuously assess employee performance. In the early days of the platform economy, millions of workers were drawn into gig work by the promise of flexible schedules and individual autonomy. Initially, workers could set their own flexible schedules, work with apps whenever they wanted and take the highest-paid, most in-demand jobs. But the initial freedom has been eroded gradually by the platforms, so that more and more it is required for employees to set aside specific time slots for taking up work opportunities. That has significantly reduced real operational autonomy. Under this strict algorithmic regime of work, workers who violate operational rules (rules not written by them) are subject to severe administrative sanctions and demotions from privileged categories of work. The algorithms are arbitrarily complex and opaque to the employees, who are very stressed about why they are getting rewards or penalties. The opacity also means that workers have little to no opportunity to contest, appeal or discuss these automated decisions (Fairwork India, 2024), with the deeply entrenched system of the platform economy operating in an inherently asymmetrical power structure.

To adequately evaluate the human costs of digital labour, we need to avoid treating algorithmic management as a singular, coherent feature of all platforms. Instead, automation control is achieved through specific technical architectures, surveillance metrics and behavioural interventions specific to the operational needs of different sectors of the platform. For example, Uber and Ola employ driver profiling and automated surge pricing and spatial matching algorithms as part of their algorithmic control (Parth & Bathini, 2021). Drivers are rated on acceptance rates and are tracked in real time for location. Automated sanctions are triggered when low-fare rides are declined, or individual boundary limits are set (e.g., "shadowbanning," which is a temporary deactivation from dispatch queues, or routing to lower-paying fare segments) (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). This micro-targeted control takes away the spatial autonomy of drivers and forces them to follow the surge zones created by the algorithm, thus increasing the fuel and vehicle maintenance costs (Medappa, 2023).

But quick-commerce and food delivery platforms like Swiggy, Zomato and Blinkit operate through hyper-local, time-bound algorithmic control, consumed by extreme speed and temporal discipline. Another set of dispatch algorithms set aggressive delivery deadlines by constantly computing estimated times of arrival under ideal traffic conditions, promising deliveries within a time frame of 10 to 15 minutes (Goyal & Rangaswamy, 2024). Delivery workers are subject to ramified incentive tiers and real-time GPS surveillance: even slight delays can result in pay cuts, deprioritisation of order assignment or penalties for customer ratings (Fairwork India, 2024). Empirically, this high-pressure time control is known to be physically risky. Delivery drivers are compelled to endure chronic physical fatigue, forego basic physiological breaks, and navigate traffic hazards in an effort to meet algorithmically dictated completion quotas (Behl et al., 2022; Goyal & Rangaswamy, 2024).

A third, again distinct, form of algorithmic control is visible in home-based personal and beauty service platforms like Urban Company. Algorithmic management, therefore, invades private domestic spaces with important implications for gendered labour (Fairwork, 2023). Behaviour and quality are controlled using intrusive customer rating thresholds, compulsory purchase of standardised kits and rigid slot-blocking regimes instead of mobility platforms (Komarraju et al., 2022). Service providers, predominantly women, are immediately and

automatically deactivated from the platform if they fail to meet these standards (Fairwork India, 2023), with strict average rating standards (for example, 4.7/5 stars). This means workers are subjected to greater emotional labour and precarious working conditions in clients' homes, with no room to push back on arbitrary feedback from clients without risking their entire livelihood. Looking across these different sectorial mechanisms, we find that algorithmic control is not an infrastructure of one-size-fits-all, but a set of malleable technical tools designed to exploit the particular spatial, temporal and gendered vulnerabilities of different labour forces.

This dramatic reduction in worker autonomy is mirrored by a continuing decline in real earning power. Baseline fares are down and gig worker's direct out-of-pocket costs of operation are up. In a traditional employment contract, capital assets and maintenance are borne by the company, but in the platform business model, all costs are externalised onto individual workers. The employee pays for all operational costs including fuel for the car, ongoing mechanical repairs, mobile cellular data and auto insurance and this significantly reduces their actual earnings (Fairwork India, 2024). An example of this complex financial strain is seen in the testimony of a Swiggy delivery executive in Thiruvananthapuram who said that local fuel prices were often raised without equivalent increases in delivery fares. But his workdays were much longer and more physically demanding and his overall income was "not enough to support his family" (Fairwork India, 2024). This lived experience radically undermines the corporate myth of gig labour as a lucrative and flexible pathway to economic mobility, replacing it with an unavoidable treadmill of diminishing returns and compelled overwork.

The financial precariousness of platform workers is further exacerbated by the complete absence of social protection and institutional safety nets. Corporations purposefully circumvent labour laws by referring to gig workers as independent contractors. They don't get the standard benefits, like paid sick days, employer-provided health insurance, compensation for on-the-job injuries or retirement plans. Policy debates and legislative efforts around social security for platform workers have been slow. The existing regulatory structures are highly limited, fragmented and structurally designed to leave out the vast majority of active workers (Heeks et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the practical implications of this legal exclusion, as it resulted in the complete absence of medical protection, emergency aid or income security for gig workers in the case of actual illness or urgent medical emergencies (Agrawal & Bhukya, 2022). While the Code on Social security, 2020, came into effect on November 21, 2025, its effectiveness in addressing the underlying human costs and imbalance relationship between platforms and workers is yet to be realised fully.

Gig worker's first-hand accounts show the impact of daily precarity on platform worker's labour, psychological health and lived corporeality. Ride-hailing drivers say: "We work twelve hours a day and we are always anxious, and at increased risk of being deactivated for even small operational errors" (Singh & Kaur, 2022, p. 595). As Raval (2020) aptly observes, precarity is "not an incidental feature of platform labour but is built into the design of platforms and the socio-technical infrastructures of platform-living" (p. 57). Ultimately, the digital consumer convenience is paid for at a high human cost by gig workers in India who are subjected to constant algorithmic surveillance, have no basic legal protections, and platform companies are making handsome profits from their precarious human labour.

Regulation and the Future of Platform Work

Digital platform work is becoming the paradigmatic model of the future of work as part of the global transformation of labour regimes, profoundly altering the organisation, monitoring and monetisation of human labour both in modern India and on international markets (Fairwork India Report, 2023). Platform capitalism, through a ubiquitous and complex corporate narrative of self-directed entrepreneurship, operational autonomy, and frictionless income generation, provides a democratised workplace free of traditional bureaucratic procedures and unflexible employer hierarchies (Raval, 2020). But the lived reality is a much darker and deeper phenomenon of extreme precarity, digital surveillance and unrelenting algorithmic discipline for millions of app-based drivers, couriers and service providers (Fairwork India, 2024). Gig work is heavily concentrated in low-wage, feminised service sectors like beauty, wellness, and domestic work from the home. They are physically unsafe, they have low mobility, they earn volatile incomes and they are subject to the whims of the customer review. Platform business models routinely exploit and exacerbate, instead of alleviating, these workplace risks by increasing the unreported burden of unpaid domestic care work (Fairwork India, 2023). In response to the daily grind of physical exhaustion, precarious financial returns, and persistent existential risk, localised acts of

defiance and refusal have started to appear. Such refusals violently rupture the corporate fiction of platform labour as a flexible, non-harming source of extra income and raise a profoundly political question about who is a legitimate worker, whose labour has intrinsic value and how human dignity is to be maintained in this digital economy (Fairwork India, 2024).

This increased labour consciousness has led to a set of isolated, dispersed but hugely significant moments of collective mobilisation in Indian cities (Business Standard Report, 2024). This growing terrain of resistance was forged by the brave strikes that Urban Company's female beauty workers, especially in Delhi and Bengaluru, made between 2021 and 2022 against brutal commission cuts, punitive work target quotas, and a total absence of transparency around algorithmic penalty systems (Fairwork, 2023). In this historic mobilisation, women workers revealed the dishonesty of "platform flexibility," where flexible work arrangements are often used to impose increased surveillance, hazardous working conditions and poverty wages. Likewise, delivery couriers of major food delivery and quick-commerce platforms like Swiggy and Zomato went on a massive strike in major cities like Hyderabad, Chennai and Mumbai. The couriers have formed a collective to fight the arbitrary, unexplained account suspensions by algorithmic management systems, the sharp cuts in the per-order incentive and the uncompensated rise in fuel prices (Business Standard Report, 2024). These collective refusals are not just economic struggles, but reflect a deep class consciousness among platform workers, which converts individual grievances into a potent critique of corporate exploitation (Singh & Kaur, 2022).

Meanwhile, platform labour in India is undergoing a major transformation, from practices of advanced digital networking to traditional union organising (Agrawal & Bhukya, 2022). Organised labour unions such as the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT), the All India Gig Workers Union (AIGWU), and the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union (TGPWU) have emerged as institutional champions for fair working conditions, algorithmic transparency, and wage protection (Fairwork India, 2024). These formal institutions exist alongside informal, decentralised digital networks created by employees, including vibrant worker forums on social media sites such as X (Twitter), encrypted WhatsApp chat groups, and Telegram channels (Singh & Kaur, 2022). The robust networked resistance mechanism allows workers spread across geographies and physically separated to form virtual solidarity networks, instantly communicate about arbitrary fare cuts, and coordinate sudden work stoppages across whole cities (Agrawal & Bhukya, 2022). Gig workers are exposing the structural realities and real-time vulnerabilities of platform capitalism and digital connectivity is used to overcome spatial isolation. More importantly, this collective engagement produces a shared political understanding that their everyday precarity, physical exhaustion and algorithmic subordination are not individual shortcomings but intentional operational features of the platform economy itself (Raval, 2020).

The Indian platform economy exhibits a structural conflict between the regulatory regime of the national social security frameworks and the state-level statutory interventions. At the national level, the Code on Social Security (2020) was a milestone in explicitly defining "gig workers" and "platform workers" in the legal lexicon of India (Pawar & Srivastava, 2022). The Code envisages the establishment of a Centralized Social Security Fund, which will be financed by a mix of contributions from platforms and government grants on a percentage (1% to 2%) of annual turnover (Chattopadhyay, 2024). But a major weakness of the national framework is that it does not deal with the fundamental legal fiction of misclassified workers. The Code makes a clear distinction between platform workers and regular employees. It denies gig workers the basic labour rights such as the right to protected collective bargaining, overtime pay, controlled maximum working hours and statutory minimum wages (Heeks et al., 2021).

Federal restrictions have prompted states to create their own innovative, local regulatory initiatives to tackle platform precarity. The historic Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023, established India's first statutory welfare board, which was funded by a per-transaction fee automatically deducted from each platform order or trip (Fairwork India, 2024). This model was included in the Karnataka Gig Workers (Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2025 that extended the scope of the state's governance by requiring transparency in algorithmic management and creating comprehensive registries of worker data (Government of Karnataka, 2025). Similarly, Tamil Nadu has pioneered targeted welfare schemes like state-sponsored disability and personal accident insurance (Fairwork India, 2024). This kind of intervention by the State represents a paradigm shift to industry-specific oversight, paid for directly by the operations of the platforms.

Importantly, we need to distinguish between de facto enforcement in practice of real-world application, and de jure, symbolic legal recognition only. The design of enforcement procedures for platform workers protected under federal and state statutes poses administrative and structural conflict. Years after the enactment of the Code, workers in the country still do not have functional social security coverage due to long delays in the formulation of operational rules and centralised registration portals (Chattopadhyay, 2024). Welfare boards face serious bottlenecks at the operational level at state level. Many platform corporations initially resist the process of collecting transaction fees. Second, audit systems are under-funded and fines for non-compliance are rarely levied (Fairwork India, 2024). Moreover, most urban gig workers are migrants who cannot claim their benefits across state borders due to the lack of mechanisms for interstate portability (Heeks et al., 2021). This is the enforcement gap that leaves platform workers open to ongoing income volatility and occupational hazards even as the universe of legislation grows and demonstrates that statutory recognition alone in the absence of strong administrative enforcement is not enough to eliminate platform precarity.

Comparative Analysis of Platform Practices, Worker Risks, Legal Protections and Regulatory Gaps in India:

Platform Practice	Human Cost	Applicable Legal Protection	Enforcement Mechanism	Identified Regulatory Gap
Automated Trip allotment & Real-Time Location Tracking (<i>Uber, Ola</i>)	Loss of control over work, paying all fuel and repair costs out of pocket, lower net income, and temporary app blocks for declining certain rides (Medappa, 2023; Parth & Bathini, 2021).	Code on Social Security, 2020 (Section 114: Central Social Security Fund); Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines 2020 (Chattopadhyay, 2024).	Platforms self-report their data and contribute 1% to 2% of their annual turnover into a central fund (Chattopadhyay, 2024).	No guaranteed minimum fare per kilometre, no reimbursement for vehicle costs, and no protection against penalties for turning down trips (Heeks et al., 2021).
Strict Delivery Deadlines (<i>Food Delivery: Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit</i>)	High risk of road accidents, body injuries, physical lethargy, unpaid waiting time for orders, and lower pay due to customer ratings (Behl et al., 2022; Goyal & Rangaswamy, 2024).	State-funded accident insurance (Tamil Nadu, 2025); Proposed safety rules under the Karnataka Gig Workers Act, 2025 (Fairwork India, 2024).	State welfare boards handle insurance claims, while local labour departments monitor safety compliance (Government of Karnataka, 2025).	No legal limit on daily working hours, no mandatory health insurance paid by platforms (Chattopadhyay, 2024; Fairwork India, 2024).
Strict Rating System & Rigid Time Slots (<i>Home & Beauty Services</i>)	High personal spending on compulsory services, heavy emotional stress, and personal safety risks inside client homes (Fairwork India, 2023).	Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers Act, 2023; Karnataka Gig Workers Act, 2025 (Fairwork India, 2024; Government of Karnataka, 2025).	Small welfare fees (0.25% to 2%) automatically deducted from every customer payment into state welfare funds (Fairwork India, 2024).	Lack of safety laws adapted for work inside private homes (such as workplace harassment protection) (Fairwork, 2023).
Workers classified as Independent contractors	Lack of minimum wages, paid sick leave, retirement benefits, etc. (Elias & Gomez, 2025;	Code on Social Security, 2020 (Section 2(35) & 2(61): Legal definitions for gig and platform	Companies upload worker data to central and state online government registries	Laws do not reclassify workers as full employees or give them core labour rights, leaving employment status

	Parwez, 2022; Ray, 2024).	workers) (Pawar & Srivastava, 2022).	(Chattopadhyay, 2024).	entirely up to platforms (Heeks et al., 2021).
Unexplained Account Blocking	Sudden loss of job and income, and no clear way to challenge or appeal account suspensions (Raval, 2020; Singh & Kaur, 2022).	Karnataka Gig Workers Act, 2025 (Requires 14 days' advance notice before blocking an account and a right to human review) (Government of Karnataka, 2025).	State dispute resolution boards (including government, platform, and worker representatives) and grievance officers (Government of Karnataka, 2025).	Rules differ across state lines; there is no national law requiring platforms to explain how algorithms make decisions or guarantee human appeals across India (Chattopadhyay, 2024).

Note. The table is prepared and compiled by the authors by synthesising framework parameters from Fairwork India (2024) and Heeks et al. (2021), along with statutory provisions from national and state legislation like the Code on Social Security, 2020; Rajasthan Act, 2023; Karnataka Act, 2025 and sector-specific empirical research (Behl et al., 2022; Goyal & Rangaswamy, 2024; Komarraju et al., 2022; Medappa, 2023; Parth & Bathini, 2021).

In the end, the fluid and fluidity of India's platform economy demonstrates that the future of work cannot be left to the unregulated discretion or empty self-regulation of corporate algorithms (Raval, 2020). The proactive struggles of food couriers, app-based beauticians, ride-hailing drivers and digital freelancers are giving rise to a new labour politics based on defiance, democratic rights and social citizenship (Fairwork India, 2024). Social security funds and state-level welfare boards are an important first step to address acute vulnerabilities but cannot be a replacement for real structural reform that recognises platform workers as full-rights workers. As platform capitalism saturates every facet of urban life, statutory guarantees of enforceability, democratic oversight of algorithmic management and robust collective bargaining mechanisms will be imperative to ensure the survival and dignity of gig workers (Singh & Kaur, 2022). However, the actual progress of the digital economy will depend on the degree to which worker rights, human dignity and democratic agency are embedded into the legal and social fabric of the country, rather than on algorithmic efficiency or corporate profit margins (Heeks et al., 2021).

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

The analysis suggests that regulations should address the underlying risks that workers continue to face even after their formal recognition under social-security legislation. First, regulation should take into account the operational expenses incurred by the workers to do their job. As Fairwork India (2024) recommends that workers should earn a decent income "after taking account of work-related costs" (p. 10). Second, policies should also address how algorithmic management affects workers and the conditions under which they work. There is a need for labour protection which will cover "adequate pay, working time regulation, occupational safety and health, employment protection" and "ensuring the transparency of algorithms and data to protect workers' rights" (Sasaki, 2024). Fairwork India (2024) also recommends a process through which "workers can be heard, can appeal decisions affecting them, and be informed of the reasons behind those decisions" (p. 10). Finally, social security protection should be available to workers across different types of platform work. NITI Aayog (2022) recommends "universal and portable social security measures" which can be easily accessed by the workers (p. 90).

In conclusion, it can be said that the growing platform economy in India has created new employment opportunities, but it has also added significant risks and responsibilities onto workers while giving greater control to the platforms over how work is organised. As argued in this article, the flexibility offered by platform work is accompanied by uncertain earnings, maintenance costs that workers have to bear themselves, algorithmic control, and a change in the dyadic employer-employee relationship as the platform workers are treated as independent contractors where they may be formally independent but still depend on platforms for their income. India's policy regulations have begun to recognise these concerns. The Code on Social Security, 2020, which

came into force on 21st November, 2025, formally recognises gig and platform workers and provides for social security measures which covers areas such as life and disability, accident insurance, health and maternity benefits, and old-age protection. However, this recognition does not change the underlying relationship between platforms and workers. Social security can provide some protection against the risks that workers face. However, concerns such as uncertain incomes, algorithmic control, employment status, and the way responsibility is shared between platforms and workers still remain. The central issue is whether regulation can address the unequal distribution of risks and control between platforms and workers and not just about whether gig workers receive social protection or not. The future of platform economy will depend on whether policy regulations can do more than just recognise the problems faced by workers or not. It should also address the underlying human costs by providing real protection for workers and make platforms more accountable for working conditions.

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